Welcome to the November issue of TECHcomments, the quarterly STC/SM chapter newsletter! In this issue, we introduce our 2008-09 council volunteers, spotlight the achievements of fellow chapter members, and review our program meetings. We also provide information on upcoming programs and related events.

Council Members – This year’s executive council includes:
Andrea Frazier, President · Mark Lockwood, Vice President
Erin Moulton, Treasurer and Immediate Past President · Julie Wingett, Secretary

Committee managers and volunteers include:
Deb Stacy, Job Board / Listserv · Sharon McDonnell, Membership
Elizabeth Ali, Education Liaison · Jill Money, Professional Liaison
Erin Moulton, Maryann Bowen and Kathleen Belanger, Nominations
Elizabeth Donoghue Colvin and Meghan Oliver, Newsletter
Kathleen Young, Publicity

Many of these folks have held various council positions over the years, both elected and volunteer. I am grateful to all for their continued service to our chapter!

Open volunteer positions include:

Programs Manager: Identifies guest speakers and schedules the events; sends out announcements.

Venue Coordinator: Arranges for the facilities for program meetings.

Greeters: Register attendees at program meetings. Members usually volunteer to greet at program meetings that are conveniently located at or near their home or workplace. We have a couple, but we could always use more!

Web Master: Maintains and updates the content on our website and works with our service provider.

If you are interested in helping out or would like more information, please contact me or the Nominations Committee.

Communication through listserv emails

We're going to be doing things a little differently this year in terms of communication with our chapter members. In an effort to reduce cost and eliminate waste, we will be moving most of our announcements - mainly program meeting announcements - to the chapter’s email list instead of sending postcards. I feel that this change will save the chapter money on printing and postage, and will result in more timely communications with our members.

As always, you will continue to receive news, announcements, and job postings via the chapter website and this newsletter. If you are not yet subscribed to the email list, you can do so by visiting our website (stc-sm.org), clicking the Listserv button, and following the instructions provided. If you have any questions about subscribing, you can contact the email list administrator at listservadmin@stc-sm.org.

The listserv is a place where all chapter members can voice opinions, share ideas, and communicate with each other. You can also send an email to me (president@stc-sm.org), our newsletter committee (newsletter@stc-sm.org) or to any of the council members (http://www.stc-sm.org/contactus.htm). Please feel free to send us your thoughts, ideas, and suggestions for programs. I hope to hear from you!

Regards,
Andrea Frazier, STC/SM President
Cool Tools
by Meghan Oliver, Newsletter Co-Editor

I’ll admit it. In college, I was cocky, and yet insecure. I hadn’t learned the golden rule that you are not your writing. Any criticism of my work, no matter how constructive, had the makings of an ego-crushing personal attack. Besides, they were wrong – I was a great editor, and I never made mistakes in my work.

Until I did.

Which brings us to the nucleus of this article: We are technical communicators. Writers. Designers. We make inaccessible jargon available to the masses. But we are not infallible, and it seems that technical editors often get the short end of the recognition stick.

That is why I was so excited when I stumbled upon Jean Weber’s site, Technical Editors’ Eyrie. Weber identifies herself as an editor first, and in more than 30 years with that title, I don’t doubt that she’s had to explain her worth a couple of times.

While Weber’s site certainly does not ignore the writer, its first allegiance is to the editor. The site offers insight into the value of technical editing, including the following topics:

- Working with a technical editor: What writers and editors can do to get the best results out of working together.
- Who needs a technical editor? The value and role of editors on a technical writing project.
- Escape from the grammar trap: Distinguish between essential and nonessential rules of grammar, punctuation, and usage.
- Do editors focus on the wrong things? Too many editors focus on details instead of the bigger picture.

Technical Editors’ Eyrie also boasts an extensive “how to” section geared toward technical editors, including stimulating topics of special interest to those of us kept awake at night by misplaced punctuation:

- Audience and document analysis
- Alternatives to the paragraph
- Editing for an international audience
- Terminology and spelling for Web-related concepts

Weber also diversifies her site, sharing additional information about such topics as technical writing and the joys, challenges and logistics of telecommuting. In addition, she links to her other sites, which include Avalook, an Australian travel site; Taming OpenOffice.org; and View from the Eyrie, Weber’s entertaining and not generally communications-related blog.

Far from being just another blogger with a strong opinion, Weber has the professional chops to back up her site. She has an extensive resume, including technical writing and editing for Lexmark and the Australian Institute of Marine Science and lecturing in both undergraduate and graduate courses at universities in and around Sydney, Australia. She is also a prolific author with nine books to her credit.

Check out Weber’s site at http://www.jeanweber.com/newsite/, and don’t worry – she welcomes non-editors with open arms as well!

Don’t forget, if you know of a cool tool, write me and let me know, so we can consider sharing it with others through this column. You can reach me at meghanoliver84@gmail.com.

TECHcomments

The newsletter of the Southeastern Michigan Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication

Co-Editors:
Elizabeth Donoghue Colvin
Meghan Oliver

In 2008-2009, TECHcomments will be published in November (Fall), February (Winter), and May (Spring). The deadline for submissions is the 15th of the month preceding publication.

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Deadline for submissions:
January 15, 2008, for the Winter 2009 issue of Techcomments. Please email submissions to newsletter@stc-sm.org.
Member Spotlight: Sharon McDonnell

Why did you decide to become an STC member?

My professors in the professional writing program at Eastern Michigan University suggested it and I listened! They said that joining STC would give me opportunities to meet people in the field, to learn new things, and to give something back—and they were right!

Why did you decide to pursue technical communication as a career?

I was trained in computer programming languages but didn’t enjoy the math preparation that a career in programming requires. Because I love to write, I decided to make technical communication my main career pursuit. I have found that my background in mainframe and client/server computer operations gives me additional skills to offer as a technical communicator.

Where are you currently employed?

I am a Senior Analyst with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan. I started with the company in 2002.

What are your job activities?

Currently, I’m handling the maintenance phase of an XML-based project that started in 2001. When I was hired in, I worked with other writers to organize information and design a template that could be used to convert existing health information documents into XML. I also helped write training materials and online help for those who would use the application. Currently, I’m designing a SharePoint site for our department and I’ll help train our staff in how to use it.

What is an example of a project you are particularly proud of?

I’m very proud of the XML project I’ve been working on, because it replaced thousands and thousands of hard-copy and electronic documents with XML files, which are searchable by topic as well as keywords. The XML application makes it a lot easier for our users to find the information they need.

How has your STC membership helped you with your career?

Through STC, I have met many people who helped steer me in the right direction with my career. I have posted knotty questions on the STC-SM listserv and have received a lot of helpful information. I have learned many new things from the monthly STC-SM programs.

What advice do you have for students as they are entering the field of technical communication?

Join STC if you are not already a member. Try to get a mentor to help you understand the ins and outs. Ask STC members for advice at the meetings and online. Most important, do your best always. Don’t settle for OK. When you have a question, consult online help first. When you need to ask someone else, take copious notes about everything, so you don’t have to ask the same question over and over. Try to learn something new frequently, to keep yourself current. Do that by taking classes offered through your employer and reading books and journals.
September Program Recap: Actively Positioning Oneself for a Successful Interview
by Meghan Oliver

On September 18, the STC/SM Chapter welcomed Al Pizzurro, who presented the program, “Actively Positioning Oneself for a Successful Interview.”

In his presentation, Pizzurro used his expertise about interviewing, gained from years of being on both sides of the conference room table, to explain how to ace a job interview.

He covered many key points helpful for any interview, including the following:

- What commonly asked interview questions to anticipate, and how to answer them
- How to question the interviewer to find out if the company is a good fit for you, rather than just the other way around
- What to do if the interview goes off track

Pizzurro gave examples from his own career as both interviewer and interviewee, including anecdotes from his own interviews gone wrong.

Additionally, Pizzurro shared tips on things any candidate can do to increase the chances of landing that dream job:

- Before the interview, research the company and the industry to help you ask informed questions and show that you are serious about the position.
- When asked the inevitable question about what one of your weaknesses is, show how you took a negative and turned it into a positive – your solution is much more important than the problem.
- Use visualization: See yourself in the role, and be positive – there’s no reason they won’t hire you!
- Always close on a positive note: “I’m really excited about this position and I think I’d be a great fit and an excellent asset.”

The September program was held at Eastern Michigan University’s Livonia satellite campus, and eight people attended. The smaller audience allowed for a lively discussion, and the attendees offered interview tips of their own.

Pizzurro works with Ford Motor Company as a Contract Specialist for Engineering Software. He uses his own experience as a job seeker and hiring manager to help people create or improve their resumes and assist them in interview preparation techniques and how to stay actively positioned in the ever-changing job market.

All pictures by Meghan Oliver
November Program Recap: Usability Testing: Observation to Analysis
by Elizabeth Donoghue Colvin

On November 5, three user experience professionals welcomed STC guests to TechSmith Corporation in Okemos, MI and shared their insights into the benefits of usability testing in their presentation, “Usability Testing: Observation to Analysis.”

The three usability experts, Barbara Hernandez, Josephine Scott and Casey Wright from TechSmith, explained how usability tests identify ways in which users struggle with a product and point to opportunities for product improvement.

During the evening, Hernandez, Scott and Wright role-played a typical usability testing session, in which the user’s attempts to work with the product—in this case, the TechSmith website—were recorded by software. Using audio and video recording, the software captures the user’s on-screen activity, including mouse clicks and keystrokes, and the user’s remarks and body language.

As the testing session progressed, Scott, acting as the test facilitator, demonstrated some dos and don’ts about the facilitator’s behavior, including:

- DO get the user’s agreement to be recorded.
- DO use a soft voice and encourage the user to act naturally.
- DO give the user helpful hints in increments when tasks involve multiple steps.
- DON’T let the user see your reactions. Avoid inadvertently influencing the user’s course of action.
- DON’T rescue the user. Let the user find his or her own way through the product.

During the test, the user was asked to “think out loud” about her experiences, while audience members used sticky notes to jot down their observations.

When the test ended, the sticky notes were collected and posted on a marker board. Audience members gathered in front of the board and, in silence, organized the notes according to the types of difficulties the user had while working with the website.

According to Hernandez, Scott and Wright, using sticky notes to organize observations is one way to identify and prioritize issues with the product that need attention. Rearranging the notes on a marker board begins the transition from user observation to a collaborative analysis of how the product can be improved.

Ultimately, the sticky notes and the user recordings serve as the basis for a discussion that should involve various product stakeholders, including designers, help writers and marketing and sales personnel. Getting the stakeholders involved in developing actionable recommendations from the usability test results is an important step in the product’s ultimate success in the marketplace with real-life purchasers and users!
Win AWESOME prizes by participating in the
STC Reach for the Stars Member-Get-a-Member Campaign!
Invite your colleagues to join STC—we’ll help you.

Prizes for Individual Recruiters

For every ten members you recruit, your name will be entered to win:
An Apple iPhone!

For every five members you recruit, your name will be entered to win:
One of three full conference registrations to the STC 2009 TechComm Summit (a $795 value)!

For every three members you recruit, your name will be entered to win: One of five live Web seminars in 2009.

For every member you recruit, your name will be entered to win:
A twelve-month membership for the 2009 membership year.

Prizes for Chapters & SIGS

Your efforts could also win prizes for your chapter and special interest group (SIG). Prizes are based on the total number of new STC members recruited by the individuals of each chapter or SIG. Using the online application, the new member identifies the name of the person who referred them, plus the chapter or SIG that will receive credit. Prizes include:

- 19” flat screen television
- Apple iPhone
- Full registrations to the STC 2009 TechComm Summit
- Web seminar registrations to an educational “hot” topic of your choice
- iPod Shuffles
- $25 Amazon.com gift cards
- And more!

The Campaign runs through 31 December 2008.

Additional information is available at http://www.stc.org/membership/mgam-about.asp
Why Renew Your STC Membership?
Some thoughts offered by the president of the STC Pittsburgh chapter

Recently, I’ve heard other STC members talking about the economy, especially the rising cost of fuel, food, health care, and other necessities, and the falling value of their homes and investments. For some STC members, their membership in STC is a prime candidate for an “extra” item to cut from their personal or professional budgets. You may be thinking about not renewing your membership in STC when it expires, or if you aren’t a current member, you may be having second thoughts about joining STC. If you still plan to renew or join STC, you may also be thinking about cutting back on meetings or events.

Before you decide not to renew or join STC, or skip a meeting you’d like to attend, I’d like to ask you this question: Over your lifetime, what is your most valuable and biggest asset?

A. Your home
B. Your education
C. Your career
D. Your retirement plan

Answer: Your career is your biggest and most important asset. Your career gives you the income to get the necessities of life, such as food, clothing, and shelter, and also to get an education, real estate, a retirement plan, and other investments and assets. When you think about how much of your time every day you spend working and how much of your lifetime is spent working, you can see why your career is so important. That’s why it’s important to manage your career well.

STC helps you manage your career by helping you to:

- Launch your technical communication career or transition into a technical communication career
- Learn new skills and enhance existing ones
- Find opportunities to network with fellow technical communication professionals
- Find a new job or a better job
- Launch an independent technical communication career
- Find help when you need it
- Improve your “soft” skills, such as public speaking or team-building skills

The cost of STC membership is “chump change” compared to the value it adds to your career. For example, STC’s free or low-cost articles, seminars, and conferences give you knowledge and skills to not only keep up with changes in the fast-paced technical communication field, but also get ready for the technical communication jobs of the future.

On a personal note, I’ve now been through four “career transitions” in my eight years as a technical communicator. In some cases, they occurred because of circumstances beyond my control, such as economic conditions; in others, there were things that I could have done or not done that might have led to a different outcome. In every case, I found STC to be a helpful resource to manage these transitions. STC proved valuable as a go-to for technical communication job leads, ways to improve my technical and interpersonal skills, and just to know that I wasn’t alone in my career transition. STC Pittsburgh’s WorkQuest was, as the MasterCard slogan goes, priceless. Also, in every case, employers and potential employers noticed my membership in STC on my resume, and some even knew of me from STC.

As President of STC Pittsburgh, part of my job is promoting the chapter and the Society, and I wrote this column as a way to promote STC and to make a case that STC is more important to your career in times like these. But I also wrote it to explain how STC helped me and why I joined STC.

With that in mind, if you join or renew your membership in November, you’ll receive two months free, because your membership won’t expire until the end of 2009. Visit stc.org to join or renew. Also, ask me about membership, because not only am I STC Pittsburgh’s President, I’m also a member!

Bryce A. Walat
STC Pittsburgh
Links to Other Organizations

Check out what other organizations are doing. Get information on programs you can attend and activities you can participate in.

**stc-sm.org**
Society for Technical Communication
Southeastern Michigan Chapter

**wms-stc.org**
Society for Technical Communication
West Michigan Shores Chapter

**neostc.org**
Society for Technical Communication
Northeast Ohio Chapter

**www.hu.mtu.edu/~stcclub/**
Society for Technical Communication
Michigan Tech Chapter

**miupa.org**
Usability Professionals’ Association
Michigan Chapter

**amwa.org**
American Medical Writers Association

**iabcdetroit.com**
International Association of Business Communicators
Detroit Chapter

**prsadetroit.com**
Public Relations Society of America
Detroit Chapter

**cmprsa.com**
Public Relations Society of America
Central Michigan Chapter

**detroitastd.org**
American Society for Training and Development
Greater Detroit Chapter

**astdannarbor.org**
American Society for Training and Development
Ann Arbor Chapter

**astd-scmc.org**
American Society for Training and Development
Mid-Michigan Chapter